



Amatka

Karin Tidbeck

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A surreal and shockingly original debut novel set in a dystopian world shaped by language--literally.

Vanja, a government worker, leaves her home city of Essre for the austere, wintry colony of Amatka on a research assignment. It takes some adjusting: people act differently in Amatka, and citizens are monitored for signs of subversion.

Intending to stay just a short while, Vanja finds herself falling in love with her housemate, Nina, and decides to stick around. But when she stumbles on evidence of a growing threat to the colony and a cover-up by its administration, she begins an investigation that puts her at tremendous risk.

In Karin Tidbeck's dystopic imagining, language has the power to shape reality. Unless objects, buildings, and the surrounding landscape are repeatedly named, and named properly, everything will fall apart. Trapped in the repressive colony, Vanja dreams of using language to break free, but her individualism may well threaten the very fabric of reality. Amatka is a beguiling and wholly original novel about freedom, love, and artistic creation by an idiosyncratic new voice. (less)

Amatka Details

Date : Published September 6th 2012 by Mix Förlag (first published January 1st 2012)

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Author : Karin Tidbeck

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From Reader Review *Amatka* for online ebook

Jessica Sullivan says

The kind of book where I had no idea what I'd be rating it until the very end. It's completely readable and thought provoking, but with a story like this, so much depends on how it all comes together.

Amatka takes place in a mysterious future world where the very fabric of reality is constantly at risk of being destroyed. The inhabitants of the four colonies that make up this world are taught from an early age that they must consistently "mark" objects in order to keep them rooted in reality. They do this by observing the space around them and repeating the names of everything in sight, thereby allowing the objects to retain their shape and function.

In a precarious world such as this one that the inhabitants still don't fully understand, it becomes necessary to enforce strict rules to maintain order.

But what if there's a better and freer way to live? That's the question that Vanja begins to ask herself, as she learns more about the mysterious history of *Amatka*, one of the four colonies.

It's a fascinating premise, and for most of the book there was just the right amount of obscurity to keep me needing to know more. The problem I had was that ultimately the payoff wasn't enough. I'm more than okay with ambiguity in novels—often I even prefer it to a clean resolution—but I need more than what *Amatka* delivered.

It's always hard for me to avoid comparing books like this to Jesse Ball's novels. In my opinion, Ball seems to strike that perfect balance where he maintains the obscurity and wonder while still offering a fully satisfying story. It's hard to pull that off. *Amatka* has a brilliant concept, but the execution left me feeling underwhelmed.

Sub_zero says

Escrita antes de ese auténtico descubrimiento que fue para mí *Jagannath*, *Amatka* es la primera novela de Karin Tidbeck, una novela mucho mejor ideada que resuelta. Por lo que he podido comprobar hasta el momento, la autora sueca se desenvuelve mejor en el terreno de las historias cortas, siendo *Amatka* un intento más bien frustrado de llevar a buen puerto una idea estupenda y repleta de posibilidades. La historia arranca con una mujer que se dirige en tren a la colonia de *Amatka* desde otra población cercana, enviada para evaluar el grado de satisfacción de la población con una serie de productos higiénicos y de paso estudiar los entresijos de una comuna donde cualquier paso es susceptible de despertar sospechas. Poco a poco, la protagonista va estrechando lazos con los extraños habitantes de *Amatka* e irá descubriendo con la ayuda de un bibliotecario la misteriosa historia del lugar, repleta de accidentes mortales, poetas revolucionarias y objetos que se disuelven cuando no cumplen el propósito para el que están hechos. Como digo, la novela contiene muy buenas ideas. Karin Tidbeck va esbozando los detalles de un universo fantástico que pretende emular el férreo modelo soviético y estimular nuestra imaginación por medio de acontecimientos que tardamos bastante tiempo en comprender. No obstante, a la novela le falta un elenco de personajes sólidos y sin duda se hubiera beneficiado enormemente de una extensión en la búsqueda de respuestas a los interrogantes que plantea. A pesar de todo, *Amatka* constituye una propuesta muy personal, atípica y muy

válida para introducirse en el alucinógeno mundo de Karin Tidbeck.

Bradley says

This one is a hard one to review without giving away certain discoverable plot twists except to say... what a surreal, surreal world.

I think it's a mild New Strange. Or perhaps it's a hardcore Magical Realism. Perhaps it's just a study in what it means to use imagination when surrounded by literalism. Maybe it's a whole society built on the necessity of crushing that imagination in all ways. Maybe it's a necessity. And maybe we're in bizarro commune land brushing its fingertips against 1984.

And maybe it's a love story. With mushrooms.

Like I said, it's hard to describe without giving it all away, and yet it's still a gentle dip into the whole stranger in a strange land, firmly rooted in banality until it's suddenly far, far from banal. :)

I enjoyed it. It made me scratch my head and just go with the strange. Mild strange, slowly getting very, very weird. What can I say? I likey. :)

Rachel Cordasco says

SF in Translation review

Hannah says

That was weird. Seriously weird, but oddly fascinating, but with an ending I found unsatisfying. My thoughts are all over the place for this one, so here they are first in list format and then a bit more elaborated.

Pros:

World building

Atmosphere

Mood

Pacing

Cons:

Characters

Prose

Conclusion.

Set in the not specified future on a (I assume) different planet, this books reads very much like a classic dystopian novel in the style of Ray Bradbury or George Orwell. The main character, Vanja, arrives in Amatka with the order to do some kind of market research on hygiene products as commercial production

has been legalized and her employer wants to know how to sell more stuff to this colony. As she falls in love with her housemate Nina, she decides to stay in this barren place even though things seem odd to her.

The main premise is stunning in its originality (at least it is to me) - things have to be named repeatedly and be marked because otherwise they dissolve into some kind of goo: so a table has a sign saying "table", doors are labeled "door" and so on. Citizens have to be constantly vigilant lest they lose important possessions. This makes for an interesting social structure where nothing is permanent and in reaction everything is rigid and unchanging. Karin Tidbeck uses this disorienting juxtaposition to paint a very vivid picture of the world she created. I absolutely adored this part.

The characters on the other hand never truly came alive for me. Their reactions are always left mostly unexplained and I had a hard time connecting with them. Especially the love story between Vanja and Nina made very little sense to me - and I never understood what they liked about each other and what made Vanja especially abandon her previous life with hardly any second thoughts.

Ultimately, I think this book works best if you study it and analyse it and discuss it with others. There are so many layers that could be talked about and so much to think about, that a casual reading does not do it justice. As it stands, it kept me at arm's length and I never felt fully engaged with the characters.

I received an arc of this book courtesy of NetGalley and Knopf Doubleday Publishing in exchange for an honest review. Thanks for that!

Rana says

Dooooode. This was strange. And amazing. Just plopped me right down into the story with no back history, no world-building, just boom here is this new plot line and this is just how stuff is.

This is the second Swedish dystopia I've read and damn, it's got a specific aesthetic. Definitely born of specific setting in nature and specific culture and government.

Libros Prohibidos says

Con un estilo limpio y eficaz, basado en la acción (apenas se describe nada), Karin Tidbeck construye una novela que se puede beber de un trago, que se lee con la misma atención con la que uno caminaría por una selva que no conoce y en la que no puede prever absolutamente nada. Reseña completa:
<http://www.libros-prohibidos.com/kari...>

Candiss says

As I listed in the "I would recommend to" section: Like classic dystopias and/or Jeff VanderMeer's works, particularly the Area X trilogy? It's perfect for readers who are intrigued by the idea of the unlikely intersection of that particular venn diagram. The weirdness seeps in drip by drip, building significantly in the final chapters, until all semblance of normalcy (quite literally) dissolves.

The very end was, for me, a bit anti-climactic, but just as with VanderMeer's *Annihilation*, the ambiguous nature of the final pages has grown on me as I've ruminated on the experience.

A few observations:

1. There are some really thought-provoking and unusual language-related speculations at the core of the story, as well as commentary on the nature of reality, matter, perception, consensus, history, freedom, change, choice, tradition, loyalty, community, family, fertility, the individual vs the group, creativity, convention, contagion...the list goes on.
2. There is a bleakness, a blandness, a rather dour, joyless, bureaucratic efficiency to the world that lulls the reader, making the weird currents even more effective at impressing their strangeness via the shift they introduce. The monotonous and mundane meet the nebulous and the alien.
3. I got an impression of experimentation on the part of the author, as if she were throwing various ideas into a stew to see how they would cook up together. This might not work for some readers, but for me it was great fun, as I'm a fan of thought exercises and philosophical riffing. But there are a LOT of ideas introduced (see point #1) - some explored, others only touched on and (sometimes vexingly) dropped - and the gestalt might be muddled or overshadowed by the many components for some readers.
4. The author doesn't do much hand-holding of the reader. I appreciate this approach, but some reader may find themselves shouting, "What the HECK is going on?!" right from the first pages.
5. If you finish this and enjoy it, you will probably find yourself mentally naming the objects around you ("Pencil-pencil-pencil...") and likely consider what might arise from changing those names.
6. This book is chock-full of rabbit holes down which one might fall - rabbit holes within rabbit holes - both of the "What if...?" variety and the "run to Google" variety.
7. A personal impression: When I was a little girl, my dad had one of those old-school label-makers that could be made to print out a little strip with bold, embossed text of one's choosing. He used to label everything in the house as a way of playfully-irritating my mother. One might enter the bathroom and discover labels announcing "MIRROR", "TOILET", "SINK", etc., on the appropriate objects. It was like living in the Batcave from the old campy original Batman TV series. I thought of that over and over while reading *Amatka*.

Gary says

People often conflate pity with sympathy. Both words may refer, superficially, to a feeling of compassion for another's misfortune; contextually, they can have radically different uses. Sympathy more often carries with it some notion of equity – it asks that compassion be born of justness, that understanding is earned because it is shared. Conversely, pity holds a note of condescension from the pitying, and a certain amount of solicitousness on the part of the pitied. Sympathy is meant to strengthen bonds between people; pity makes a spectacle of suffering and consolation, dividing us into spectators and subjects, widening the gap.

The cardinal sin of *Amatka* is that it makes its protagonist, Vanja, far more pitiable than sympathetic. The novel practically sobs her into existence. It is one thing to make a character an introvert, and quite another to bludgeon the reader with her reticence, to exhibit her meekness as a demand for empathy. But that is exactly what Karin Tidbeck does here.

The world of the novel is an interesting one, a place where language literally has the power to shape reality, so much so that things must be named repeatedly, or they will lose their form and turn into an ooze of noxious goo. As a result, the authorities exhibit an undue amount of control over the behavior of, and by extension the thoughts of, the citizens they police. Vanja dreams of a boot-free neck, with predictably tragic results.

I am usually fully on board for stories where systemic oppression is addressed, but in this case the “evil

system” and “innocent victim” are codified in such absolute, unsubtle terms that it comes off as a jaundiced, writerly construction rather than a lived-in world. And lest you think I am mistaken in my estimation of how Vanja and this novel are meant to be read, the ending literally valorizes the woeful fawning of its hero, spelling it out in no uncertain terms. It is one thing to nudge a reader’s sympathies, and quite another to push them over a cliff.

Rich says

Cuando en las sinopsis y las reviews que ves se menciona en la primera frase "es una distopía clásica", o bien es un libro muy simple enmarcado en el género y por tanto sin aportes nuevos, o más bien quieres definir algo con pocas palabras para esconder gran parte del argumento interior.

Esta historia es lo segundo.

Se te encoge el alma, quizás al nivel de Annihilation de Jeff Vandermeer.

No sé si yo también califico esta historia de "prosa sin excesos retóricos, sin metáforas, etc", pero sí te puedo decir que todo el contenido parece ser medido.

Y que la maquetación y tacto del papel... parece de calidad (y no micopapel).

Leedlo.

Y sobre todo, que alguien dé un premio a esta portada, que por muy simple que parezca, ES UNA OBRA DE ARTE EN LA SÍNTESIS DE LA NOVELA. Se nota que el portadista ha leído y entendido mucho la historia.

Bill Hsu says

So far, very different from the slippery, sparkly hairballs of Jagannath. The role of language is still strange and intriguing; but with Amatka's overt science fiction-y conventions, I fear everything mysterious and wonderful will be overexplained soon enough. The pace is also a bit on the plodding side.

Update: I love the central concept. But we do ooze slowly to the climactic events.

Jessica Woodbury says

This was my first exposure to Tidbeck. I knew nothing about her or the book before I started it. I had just gone on vacation and when I realized I was reading something rather bleak and Scandinavian I almost put it down. It didn't seem like the right fit. But there was just enough weirdness in those early chapters to get me to stick around.

Dystopia is popular these days, and this is certainly a speculative dystopia. But I enjoyed it immensely. While reading it I kept commenting about it to my traveling companion, I spent the first third saying how I really didn't know what was happening and I wasn't sure how I felt. And then I spent the last third saying whoa it got really good and whoa what is even happening right now. It is rare to read a speculative novel that

feels like it's doing something different. Of course, it also reminded me of a lot of great early sci-fi, especially those set on a bleak and sparse Mars, which feels an awful lot like the setting here in Amatka.

I don't want to tell you much at all about the society it's set in because finding all that out is part of the joy of reading it. And even when you feel like you've got a pretty good handle on how things are run and you're wondering why you're reading a memo about the ingredients in soap products, you realize that there are a few little things that are just not quite right but you don't really know why yet. I kept reading for the answer to that why, and often when I've read a book that nags at me like that the eventual reveal isn't worth the buildup. But not this time. That feeling that maybe you've got this figured out except still maybe not ends up leading to a few pivotal and crucial reveals about the world the book is set in that feel new and deep with meaning.

This is also not one of those let's-wrap-all-this-up-in-a-big-bow novels. It will not all be explained. It will not all make total sense. But the last few chapters leave a searing vision in your mind. If you're at all like me you will talk about it for days. I really must find more Tidbeck.

Toni says

Listed as sci-fi, Amatka is more of a dystopian novel. I know that this book got good reviews but the beginning of the story seemed weak to me; it was slow to reveal the plot or substance of the story. The 'weakness' seemed to permeate this story.

Life is made up of colonies - each colony has a purpose or job. Vanja, from Essre where they manufacture items necessary for life, goes to Amatka for surveys or personal hygiene to take back to the manufacturing company where she works. This was oddball enough. She decides to take up residence in Amatka, fall in love with Nina, one of her housemates, but soon discovers that all if not well in this commune. Taught all of their lives that the "world outside of the colonies was dangerous" and that language and marking items is important, Vanja begins to question the safety of the Amatka colony.

For me the book had great potential but lacked a strong story line; lots of vagueness throughout and lack of real background just threw the entire story off. The description on the back of the book was more enticing than the story itself.

I've read a lot of sci-fi, dystopia novels and this one just did not fill the bill. On to the next read!

Spoiler - The best part of the book for me was when they failed to name everything it would turn into a pile of gloom. Yep, that is vague but you'll have to read the book.

Mur Lafferty says

It's weird on a level of LeGuin or Mieville. A world where language rules all and a woman tries to break free of the rules. I'm not entirely sure if she has broken *free* by the end, or if she has new shackles, but that uncertainty flows with the rest of the book. Recommended if you like weird.

Margaret says

After reading Jagannath by Karin Tidbeck years ago, I knew I wanted to read anything of hers published in English. It's still one of my favorite short story collections. I believe Amatka is the only other of her works published in the U.S., though I could be wrong.

Amatka is both similar and different than Tidbeck's short stories. It has the same subtlety, the same unique world building, and the same ambiguous ending (which I loved). I missed out on the lyricism of Tidbeck's short stories, and I never felt engaged with the main character, Vanja. But I also think Vanja isn't the kind of person who lets others become fully engaged with her. She holds herself off with only occasional lapses into humanness, which should be more heartbreaking because of how rare they are, but I admit I didn't find them so.

The dystopian world discourages emotional connections with others as well. I don't want to go into more detail about the world building, because that aids in the novel's mystery, but it suppresses emotion and creativity--for a reason.

What Tidbeck does really well in this novel is maintain intrigue in the seemingly mundane. Vanja has been sent to Amatka to investigate and report on sanitation habits. Several of her reports are included throughout the novel. What should be a boring investigation is actually quite interesting, and slowly develops into Vanja's continued investigation into areas she hasn't been hired for.

Overall, I enjoyed reading it, and would recommend to anyone looking for unique world building in their dystopias.

Thanks to Netgalley and Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group for providing me with a free copy in exchange for an honest review.
